The Complicated Situation Around Lebanon

It seems that Tehran has realized the threat of a conflict with the coalition, the instigators of which are Saudi Arabia and Israel, and decided to reduce the tension. The Islamic Republic of Iran has back-pedaled. At the briefing on November 13, a representative of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Gasemi, announced that Tehran had always respected the independence of Lebanon and had never interfered with the internal policy of this country. "We have never interfered with the internal affairs of other countries, and the situation with Hariri is an affair of the people of Lebanon," the Tasnim agency quotes him. This formal statement was made in response to the resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister Hariri, which is said to result from his confrontation with Hezbollah following Iran's actions and the threat to his life. In fact, the statement by Iran's Foreign Affairs Ministry sounded like a response to Paris where the French stated that Iran's non-intervention into the internal affairs of Lebanon would be the guarantee of stability in this country. As a matter of fact, they have put the blame for the crisis on Iran.

The Lebanese crisis is developing and there is no sign of its rapid regulation. An attack on the pro-Iranian group in al-Assad's team, as a result of which the President's brother Maher, who is well-known for his focus on Tehran, has been suspended from command of the Syrian Republican Guard, also adds problems to Iran and runs alongside the actions of the West and Saudi Arabia. The Middle East analysts are actively analysing the possible scenarios for the crisis, and currently, they have six versions - from direct military involvement to a diplomatic resolution of the conflict. However, they are sceptical about the purely diplomatic scenario. According to them, the solution including the military is possible but only with the complete support of Israel, which Tel Aviv still treat coldly. The USA did not give the go-ahead when Russia returned to the idea of the Geneva talks in a joint statement on Syria in Da Nang, thereby pushing Astana into the background.
In this situation, this is a matter of price for Tel Aviv: if the Arabian countries recognize Israel and its right to the Golan Heights in exchange for its formal progress on the Palestinian issue (which is non-committal for the Israelis but necessary for preserving the face of the Arabs), then everything is possible. A limited operation against Hezbollah in South Lebanon may disrupt the entire system created by Iran in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In fact, first they need to carry out such an operation and bring it to a logical end by forcing Hezbollah to abandon all its positions in Syria and focus on the defence in Lebanon.

Netanyahu just announced that Israel has notified the USA and Russia about the continuation of the operations on the territory of Syria even if a ceasefire is reached. Given the fact that Israel deliberately operates in Syria against Hezbollah’s infrastructure, it is clear to whom this statement is addressed. Anyway, the focus is shifting now from Syria to Lebanon. The aim of Iran’s opponents is to try to catch it at a low point, because Iran itself, as well as Hezbollah and the Shia militant groups are seriously exhausted by the war in Syria and Iraq.

Some aims have already been reached. For one, Saudi Arabia has introduced a solid blockade of Yemen in order to dislodge Tehran. The UN, however, delicately objects, worried about a possible humanitarian catastrophe in the country, but no one in the West is interested in it as they have more important things to attend to than “the 2-3 million citizens of Yemen” who may starve to death. Iran has already faced the challenge of “unblocking” its territories. A strike on Syria took place, after which the removal of Maher from the post of Republican Guard Commander caused a split in the leadership. Lebanon is like icing on the cake. The spiral is twisting around it, and the main question is when and who “will cut the thread”.

At the same time, the joint statement from Russia and the USA in Da Nang has not gone unnoticed by Ankara and Tehran, which are the co-sponsors of the talks in Astana and the major participants of the Syrian conflict on land, in alliance with Moscow. Sochi was the host of the talks between the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Russian President Vladimir Putin. Instead of the planned two hours, the conversation lasted for four. The main issue discussed was the situation in Syria.

On the eve of the talks, the Turkish leader strongly criticized the US-Russian agreements, according to which the Syrian crisis was admitted to allow for no military resolution. "I do not understand these statements. If you believe that there is no military resolution, withdraw troops from Syria. You state that a political solution should be found, but is this not what the world has been doing for the last six years?" asks Erdogan. According to him, the Syrian government caused 1 million casualties during these years. Meanwhile, not only the number of casualties attracted attention, but also the fact that the Turkish President repeatedly advocated the illegitimacy of the regime of Bashar Assad, using the phrase "the government of Syria". In response to his partner, Vladimir Putin informed him about the Russian-American plans for the crushing defeat of the Islamic State terrorist army.

On November 14, negotiations on the same topic were held with the Iranians in Moscow: does this joint statement with the USA mean the waiving of Astana and Russia’s desire to abandon the interaction with the Islamic Republic of Iran in Syria?

Apparently, Saudi Arabia has started to mitigate military confrontations around Lebanon. Riyadh has switched to the methods of economic sanctions on Beirut. The Lebanese politicians and financial experts fear that Saudi Arabia will announce a blockade of Lebanon as it has already done with Qatar. Unlike Qatar, though, whose local population is only 300 thousand people and its economic power is enormous due to oil and gas, Lebanon does not have the resources to resist the potential blockade. 400 thousand citizens of Lebanon work abroad in the Persian Gulf area and transfer 7-8 billion dollars every year to their country. Lebanon’s economy, which is already in a complicated situation, will face a catastrophe without this money. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has already announced its claims to Lebanon regarding Iran and Hezbollah, and, apparently, it still formally holds the Prime Minister of Lebanon as a hostage. Saad Hariri resigned while in Riyadh, but his resignation still has not been approved by the President of Lebanon.

In any case, the smoke of a possible armed conflict in Lebanon has clearly dissipated today. But the situation in the region is so tense that it may break into flames at any moment both in Syria and Lebanon.

Alexander Orlov, Political Scientist and Expert Orientalist, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”